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DE RUEHNC #0803/01 2761152

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FM AMEMBASSY NICOSIA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8214

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000803

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/02/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL UNFICYP CY TU

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: CITING FRONT-RUNNERS' FLAWS, LONG SHOT
REFUSES TO BOW OUT

REF: NICOSIA 459

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Despite trailing Cyprus's "serious" presidential candidates by significant margins, outsider Costas Themistocleous voices no intention of abandoning his electoral campaign anytime soon. Recent polling shows Themistocleous's three rivals each tallying between 29 and 31 percent; in this scenario, his own one percent might well represent the difference between them advancing to the second round or going home early. A reluctant ally or kingmaker, however, he argues that neither of RoC President Tassos Papadopoulos's main challengers deserves his endorsement, since both lack the backbone to defend the 2004 Annan Plan, the "best solution yet devised to re-unify the island," and were unwilling to bury ideological differences in support of a joint candidate. Should today's near dead-heat conditions continue until December or January, however, Themistocleous will feel greater pressure from pro-solution forces within the Christofias and Kasoulides camps to work a deal. END SUMMARY.

Even a Sliver Might Make the Difference

¶12. (U) In April, former Agriculture Minister (1998-2003) Costas Themistocleous announced his decision to stand in the 2008 presidential election (Reftel). Rather than distance himself from the intensely unpopular Annan Plan, as most all of its proponents have done of late, Themistocleous continues to extol its virtues. He announced his electoral ambitions on April 24, exactly three years after Greek Cypriots buried the Plan in a referendum, and has based his campaign on reviving the UN initiative. His reward for playing the gadfly? Polling numbers that hover around one percent, well behind the leaders. Even a groundswell of support might only raise his numbers to two percent, Themistocleous had told us earlier; he understood his ability to shape the presidential debate or affect its outcome was minuscule.

¶13. (SBU) That conversation occurred in June, however, when analysts were predicting a runaway Papadopoulos win in a two-way race against DISY-supported challenger Ioannis Kasoulides. With the July breakup of the governing coalition and subsequent emergence of AKEL Secretary General Dimitris Christofias as a contender, however, the race has turned tight; thousands or even hundreds of votes may determine who advances to the second round. Themistocleous's expected haul of 4,000-odd votes suddenly appears significant, leaving pundits and Embassy contacts speculating whether he eventually intends to withdraw from the race and urge his flock to support one of Papadopoulos's challengers.

¶4. (C) Cyprus's 2008 election represents a watershed event, Themistocleous told Embassy staff in September. Should Greek Cypriot voters re-elect their hard-line president, he doubted the island's two communities would reach a settlement that reunified the island, leaving only the status quo or a negotiated partition, both unacceptable end-states.

Papadopoulos must go, he insisted (a point he repeated in a late-September televised debate, which Papadopoulos campaign coordinator and former Foreign Minister Yiorgos Lillikas parried by expressing mock gratitude -- "you don't know how much you're helping us," the ex-FM quipped.)

¶5. (C) Nevertheless, it was not Themistocleous's responsibility to spur the incumbent's downfall, he argued. His 1-2 percent support was holding steady, and with Christofias's unexpected candidacy having tightened the race, he acknowledged the others were eyeing his haul hungrily. Yet the long shot had no intention of abandoning the race and endorsing the AKEL or DISY contender, even if it meant Papadopoulos advancing to the second round and eventually winning a second term in office.

¶6. (C) A successful Cyprus solution depended on close cooperation between Cyprus's largest parties, Themistocleous contended. Yet AKEL and DISY, despite each seeking to defeat Papadopoulos -- essential for bringing about fruitful inter-communal negotiations -- had proven incapable of identifying a candidate palatable to both. AKEL deserved the lion's share of blame, he thought, since DISY repeatedly had

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stated its interest in combining forces. Further, in pushing Papadopoulos to promise to support AKEL in the event he did not advance to the second round, Christofias had shown that personal and/or party electoral ambitions figured higher on his agenda than reunifying the island. Over fifteen years, Themistocleous argued, the AKEL commissar's positions had hardened -- how else to explain Christofias's choice to join an alliance with Papadopoulos?

¶7. (C) Kasoulides and DISY merited scorn as well. While the right-wing candidate had supported the Annan Plan in 2004, Themistocleous revealed, in 2007, to boost his electoral chances, he was disparaging the UN initiative in ways similar to Christofias or Papadopoulos. In sum, neither "serious" challenger deserved his one percent, those Greek Cypriots who understood that a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation as stipulated by Annan represented Cyprus's best hope for workable governance and a peaceful future.

But Later?

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Although he tarred Papadopoulos, Christofias, and Kasoulides with the same anti-solution stain, Costas Themistocleous undoubtedly would prefer one of the challengers to unseat the incumbent come February. Yet he proclaims no intention to end his campaign and the Quixotic quest to revive the Annan Plan. Should the Big Three candidates remain separated by a slim margin well into 2008, however, pressures on the long shot should spike considerably. One close Embassy contact and prominent Annan supporter revealed October 2 that a consortium of NGOs planned to lobby Themistocleous to shutter his campaign a week before the election. NGO leaders, who believed the long-shot candidate was stealing votes from the Christofias camp, were confident he would honor their wishes and bow out, helping to ensure that "anybody but Papadopoulos" emerges victorious in February.

SCHLICHER